Al Stewart: A Man For All Seasons

By VennerRoad, 13th Nov 2014

A look at the career and music of singer-songwriter Al Stewart.

Al Stewart in February 2010.

If you haven't heard of Al Stewart, this is where your musical education begins. For those who have though, their knowledge of him will begin mostly and if not end with then extend not much further than his monster hit single *Year Of The Cat*.

So who is Al Stewart? The inventor of historical folk-rock, and arguably the greatest songwriter of this or any generation. Well, not arguably.

ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL
AL STEWART
WEDNESDAY 24 APRIL 1991 at 7:30 PM
RED SIDE LEVEL 3 DOOR 3 STAN
STALLS G36 CASH £10.50
THE SOUTH BANK CENTRE

Al Stewart concert ticket.

I first got into him when he did a session for Capital Radio; I remember the two epic songs *Nostradamus* and *Roads To Moscow* from *Past, Present And Future*. I'm not sure if this is the actual programme but the date is about right. At the time I was living in London, the city of my birth. I didn't get to see him in the flesh until December 10, 1980 – if the information listed here is correct. By that time I had relocated to Leeds, and came down especially, travelling back on an overnight train. Needless to say, it was worth it.

It was while I was living in Leeds that I began collecting his records in earnest. Many of his songs struck a chord with me, as did the man himself. For example, Al was born posthumously; I was born either shortly after or shortly before the death of my father, whom I never knew, period, nor did I ever meet my birth mother. Al was luckier though because his mother was taken in by his paternal grandfather. Although Al was technically a Scotsman, his mother soon relocated to her native England where he was sent to boarding school – as was I, though for health reasons. Like Al, I studied guitar – classical though. I could sight-read fairly proficiently, and wrote my first music – on an acoustic rather than a classical guitar – around 1980. My first two melodies have survived, but the first song I ever wrote was total rubbish, and I binned it. I gave up around 1995, donated my last guitar to a charity shop, and can no longer read music. Another thing, when I was younger and clean shaven, I fancied I looked a lot like Al as he appeared on the front cover of the *Modern Times* album.

Although Al did play electric guitar for a bit, he was basically acoustic, which was how he made his name. During the Swinging Sixties, he was in London right in the thick of it; his later song *Gina In The Kings Road* captures the *Zeitgeist* better than almost any other. If you close your eyes you can just imagine Julie Christie walking down the Kings Road with her hands thrust in her raincoat pockets, and wearing designer sunglasses to boot.

Al's debut album was *Bedsitter Images*; in Leeds, I picked up a copy on vinyl from a young guy who virtually threw it at me, saying it was that awful. Some of the tracks took a little getting used to; truly *Swiss Cottage Manoeuvres* was awful, it should really not have been orchestrated, but the later acoustic version is just fine. The title track was one that really gelled with me because earlier when I lived in a Ladbroke Grove bedsit, the trains went right by my window, and best not to mention the Underground.

After *Bedsitter Images* came *Love Chronicles*, with that epic title track; this caused no little controversy over its use of the dreaded F word, and it struck more than a chord. Indeed, there is a passage therein that many men will probably recognise – when the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Best to say no more. Many of his earlier tracks are related to the woman who was the love of his life at that time, like the glorious piano-based *The News From Spain*. Al lost his first true love, as I did mine, the big difference is that he wasn't at fault while I was. The early song *Elvaston Place*, which was not released for some three decades, was one I played over and over again a few years ago when I contemplated ending it all, not for the first time in my life. Clearly we had both been in the same dark place. Al found love in later life, while I thought I had. From London, he relocated shortly after his big breakthrough to the West Coast of America, and his two daughters – charmingly named Violet and Daisy – are as

American as Mom's apple pie.

Dave Nachmanoff has played with Al since before the turn of the Millennium, and although it would be misleading to call him the junior partner (except age-wise), a lot of the Old Master has rubbed off on the acolyte. This is most noticeable on *The Loyalist* – which Al both co-wrote and guested on – and on Dave's own *Descartes In Amsterdam*. Even though he once taught philosophy, their is no hiding the influence.

I saw the two of them together at Croydon's Fairfield Halls in October of last year, the 6th time I have seen the man himself.

Al Stewart autographed programme.

From the personal to the historical; the first song in this new genre was *Manuscript*, one that is also personal for Al, and mentions his first real love again, Mandi. This appeared on *Love Chronicles* – his second album – but it was not until his 5th release, *Past, Present, And Future* – in 1974 – that he developed it further; this includes the two previously mentioned epic tracks *Nostradamus* and *Roads To Moscow*. *Modern Times* is largely contemporary, but *Year Of The Cat* is partially in the past with in particular *Lord Grenville*. *Time Passages* straddles the fence but includes *A Man For All Seasons* and *Palace Of Versailles*, the latter of which is based on a 16th Century pavan by William Byrd – great stuff. And talking of great, *Shah Of Shahs*, a lachrymosal track from 2008 about recent history was researched in incredible depth, and is a truly great song.

Al may be fond of history, but he is also a great fan of wine, and is rumoured to have a very fine cellar of the stuff. In 2000, he released a concept album about wine, *Down In The Cellar*, which lapses into the historical in places. In recent years his new material has slowed to a trickle, but there have been tours, and next year he will be returning to the UK to perform the complete *Year Of The Cat* album at the Royal Albert Hall the same way he did last year. His latest release is the single *Elvis At The Wheel*.

You can check out his music on his official website, and the stories behind a few dozen on his recordings on Songfacts, most of which were written by someone not a million miles from here.